

NEWSLETTER

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What Schools Want Parents to Know

DURING THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS, *the topic of how to increase parent and family involvement in schools has been the subject of many research studies, articles, and speeches. It is likely that every school in the country devotes some portion of its annual plan to explaining how it will increase parent involvement. Yet as widely used as this term is, its meaning isn't always clear. Some equate involvement with chaperoning field trips or volunteering for PTA committees. Others define it as attendance at an open house or signing homework folders.*

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (2002) provides a very specific definition that answers the question "What is parent involvement?" It defines parental involvement as "the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities" (Sec. 9101 [32]). Parents, the law suggests, should be full partners in their child's education, play a key role in assisting in their child's learning, and be encouraged to be actively involved at school (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Phrases in this definition such as *two-way*, *key role*, and *full partners* reinforce the notion that parents are entitled to participate with the school in their children's education and that they should. To encourage that participation, this month's newsletter summarizes five important points about involvement that every parent should know.

Parent Involvement Makes a Difference for Students

The research is in, and it is clear. Study after study has shown that the involvement of parents and families in the schooling of their children makes a significant difference. Regardless of income and background, students with parents who are involved in their academic careers are more likely to earn high grades and test scores, enroll in higher level programs, and be promoted. These students attend school regularly, show improved behavior,

adapt well to school, and have better social skills (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). The findings hold true across all segments of society—poor, minority, and middle class. All students do better when their parents are involved in their school lives, and “Parent and community involvement that is linked to student learning has a greater effect on achievement than more general forms of involvement” (p. 38).

Parents Don't Have to Come to School to Be Involved

For parents, being involved doesn't have to mean being at school every day. In fact, it doesn't necessarily mean going to the school at all. Parents can have a positive effect on student achievement by promoting learning at home and reinforcing what is taught in school (Henderson & Berla, 1994).

Most schools and teachers are eager to provide parents with concrete and practical suggestions for how they can support their child's education at home, even if they rarely come to the building. The following list based on suggestions from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2002) provides a starting point. It suggests that parents do the following:

- Read with, to, and in the presence of their children. Parents who read encourage the practice and allow children to see firsthand that reading is valuable, useful, or enjoyable. It doesn't matter if it is newspapers, magazines, instruction manuals, or cereal boxes. Public and school libraries are readily available sources of free materials.
- Reinforce the value of a family routine involving homework, meals, and a regular bedtime. Children thrive on structure. Conversation during dinner helps improve children's language skills—both their understanding of what they hear and their ability to express themselves.
- Monitor the use of television, help children choose what to watch, watch TV with them, and talk to them about what they have seen.
- Offer praise and encouragement to their children. Kind words and constructive criticism play an important role in influencing children to become successful learners.

If parents can spend time at school, there is always plenty to be done. Parents make effective liaisons, and their contact with other families gives the school an additional way to communicate important information about upcoming events and assignments. They can lead discussion groups and workshops on topics from homework assistance to sibling rivalry. Some schools create a parent “buddy” program in which parents new to the school are assigned to veterans who help acquaint them with processes and procedures. Author Laurence Steinberg (1997) notes that high school students especially benefit from their parents' participation in activities conducted at school. These include coming to programs presented by the school, attending extracurricular activities, and participating in “back to school” nights.

Informed Parents Are a School's Best Customers

Some parents are unfamiliar with thinking of themselves as “customers” of their public school system. But in fact they are, since federal and state laws require that all children be provided a high-quality, public education. Research reinforces the value of this consumer notion, indicating that parents' expectations for the level of education their children will attain and parents' satisfaction with their children's school are consistent predictors of both academic achievement and social adjustment (Reynolds, Mavrogenes, Hagemann, & Bezruczko, 1993).

Like other consumer-based enterprises, schools do better when they hear from customers with questions, comments, and constructive criticism. Asking questions promotes the two-way communication that is a critical part of effective parent involvement. It also helps challenge schools to continuously improve their efforts to reach parents. Some conversation starters for parents include the following:

- Is there help available if my daughter is struggling?
- What are the school's safety and discipline standards?
- What courses does my son need if he's thinking about applying to college?

Parents will find that most teachers are eager to share information about what students are learning or what resources are being used in lessons.

Just as parents relish getting a call from their child's teacher "just to say hi" or to note something positive their child has done, teachers appreciate hearing from parents in a proactive way. When parents call a teacher or schedule a meeting to ask "What unit is coming up next?" or "Are there any materials I can get at the library to support what my child is learning?" and not just "Why did my child get a failing grade on this essay?" they are signaling their willingness to be a part of the team effort to educate their child.

Working Together Creates a Better School

In recent years, many schools have changed their view of involvement from the notion of "parent as helper" to "parent as partner" by developing ways to share decision making with parents. Participating in school advisory councils, interview committees, or policymaking groups give parents ways to work with schools to solve problems and achieve common goals.

Studies indicate that creating these opportunities encourages parent involvement and may even have a positive effect on student achievement. A survey of more than 400 parents of high school students in Maryland revealed that their attitudes toward their children's schools are positively influenced by efforts schools make to promote partnerships with them. They are more likely to come to the school if the school encourages them to be volunteers and participate in decision making (Sanders, Epstein, & Connors-Tadros, 1999).

Researcher Don Moore (1998) studied the relationship between the Chicago Public Schools' local school councils and student achievement in reading. The councils, mandated by law, must have a majority membership of parents whose children attend the school. Among other activities, members select the principal and develop and approve the annual school plan and budget. Using 27 indicators—including the degree to which the council contributed to the school's instructional program, leadership, and climate—Moore rated the

relative strength and weakness of the council in his study schools. He found that schools with significant increases in scores had strong school councils, while those with declining scores or flat scores had weak councils.

It's About the Children

High-performing schools are student centered. Staff who work in these schools set aside their differences to concentrate on the needs of students. The same should be true of parent-school relationships. In schools with strong parent-family relations, the staff "recognize and act on the belief that parents want what's best for their children" (Pritchard Committee for Academic Excellence, 2001, p. 8), and parents maintain a high degree of trust that teachers are doing all they can to promote student achievement. Both partners develop strong communication skills, stay flexible, and look for ways to make things work.

Conclusion

Parents can make a significant contribution to their child's education in a number of ways. As teachers, they can provide a home setting that promotes and reinforces what is taught at school. As supporters, they can contribute knowledge and skills, enrich the instructional program, or provide additional resources. As advocates, parents can help children make their way through the school system and help the system be more responsive to all families. And as decisions makers, they can work with the school in solving joint problems (Henderson & Berla, 1994). Schools welcome parents in all of these capacities and know that their active involvement contributes significantly to the achievement of their students.

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